

Getting Started

This Toolkit is for You

Libraries are in a Position to Reflect on the Future

While libraries have existed for thousands of years, there has never been a better time to reflect on and plan for the future of libraries than right now. There has been a dramatic shift underway to digital services and delivery models which are enhancing access for patrons but sometimes creating new challenges for libraries. Despite the growing relevance and use of libraries in communities across the country, library staff are increasingly asked to do more with less as budgets grow tighter.

Libraries are essential to providing people access to information, and they are also one of the last spaces that are open to everybody. In a world where nearly everything is monetized and it is often hard to find a place to sit or a bathroom to use without paying money for it, the library opens its doors and provides its resources for free. This commitment to inclusivity helps libraries adapt in changing times, but also pressures them to be all things to all people with limited resources.

In short, as important as libraries are, many remain underfunded and the challenges facing libraries and the people who work in them are real, complex, and varied.

Futures Thinking Is an Approach You Can Use

We crafted this toolkit to introduce a way of thinking that will strengthen your library and community by preparing your staff for what might come in the future. It is an invitation to investigate possible changes and their impacts. It is called strategic foresight or futures thinking. This way of thinking encourages participants to imagine a variety of possible futures, rather than trying to

predict a single future. At the completion of the process, participants, having thought about a variety of scenarios, are better prepared to engage with an unpredictable future. Several other industries, particularly business and technology, have used this forward-thinking approach for several years to design and plan for their preferred future. In this toolkit, we have curated three ways to integrate futures thinking into your library which you will find in the following chapters.

A Call to Action

As someone working in libraries, we hope it is your mission to improve your community by facilitating access to knowledge. In order to continuously change and improve the library's offerings to the community, you will want to have a deep understanding of the current and future needs of your community. No one understands your community as well as you, and no one is in a better position to envision the future of library work.

We know your days are busy and the demands of working in the library are high, but that's all the more reason to engage with new ways of thinking. It may seem as though positive change is difficult or impossible, but futures thinking tells us that the future hasn't been decided yet, and we can play a role in influencing which path the future takes. We hope you'll join us!

About SPLAT

The creation of the Special Projects Library Action Team, or SPLAT, was the outcome of a visioning session held in 2005. The members of SPLAT represent different types of libraries, positions in libraries, and different regions of Idaho. SPLAT members serve as change agents planted across the state, and they often help to push new ideas into the library community. By joining the group, SPLAT members pledge to build their own expertise in innovative practices, share their expertise and experiences with their colleagues in the Idaho library community, and use their expertise with library patrons in their community on a regular basis.

Since 2017, SPLAT has been focusing on futures thinking and how we can bring this exciting idea to libraries and library staff across the state.

How This Toolkit Works

This toolkit is divided into five chapters: an introductory chapter, a guide for using The Futures Thinking Playbook with teens in a library, a guide for book displays on futures thinking, a guide for using futures thinking in professional development, and a final chapter with additional resources. Each guide includes programs and activities that you can use in your library, in addition to a list of resources for further reading and research.

A Note on Toolkit Development

Like most SPLAT projects, this one started with a brainstorming activity. We divided our team into three groups and asked each group to come up with a focus area they wanted to learn more about to incorporate futures thinking into libraries. This exercise resulted in the topics of this toolkit. Over several months, each group worked independently to develop the content for their topic as a guide that could help a library worker understand more about futures thinking. Each section was then combined into a cohesive toolkit.



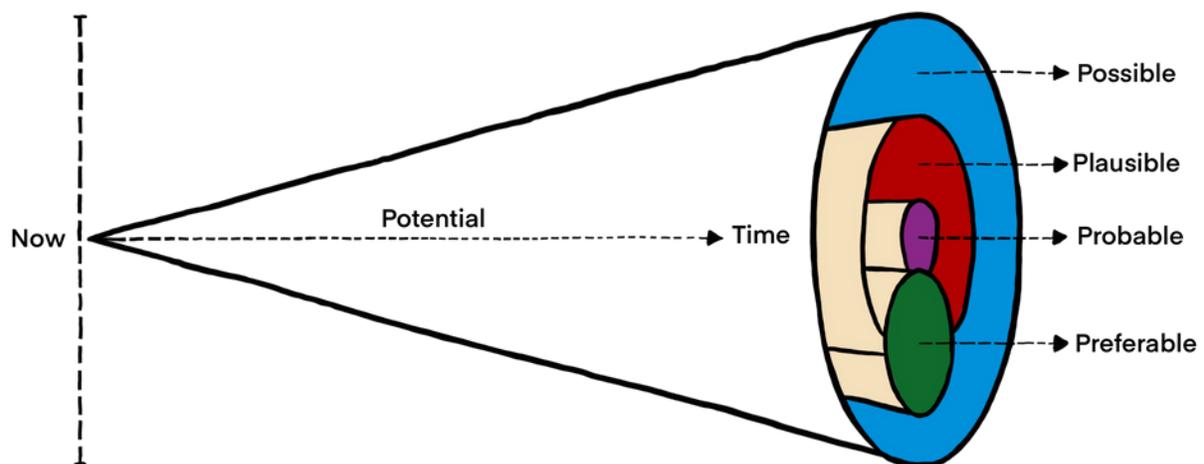
**SPLAT leaders
Deana Brown
(foreground) and
Annie Gaines
(background)
assembled the parts
of the toolkit and
brainstormed next
steps.**

What is Futures Thinking?

Futures Thinking Is a Discipline, a Tool, and a Mindset

Futures thinking is a way of thinking about the future in a structured way. By using divergent thinking, or seeking many possible answers and acknowledging uncertainty, it allows us to consider all the possible, plausible, probable, and preferable futures. As a discipline, a tool, and a mindset, futures thinking provides techniques to help you think about the forces that are shaping the future, explore the implications of those forces, and use that information to make decisions today that will influence the future.

As much we would like it to, futures thinking does not allow us to predict the future. It doesn't argue for one correct future or that the future is predetermined, but instead argues that there is a range of possible futures and the future can be actively shaped by the choices we make today. Futures thinking seeks to answer the question of "What could happen?" rather than "What will happen?". One useful tool of futures thinking is the cone of plausibility, which helps us to graphically represent that over time the number of possible, plausible, probable, and preferable futures grows. The further we get from our present moment, the more potential futures there are.



A cone of plausibility or futures cone is one way to visualize the different possible, plausible, probable, and preferable futures over time. (McGregor, 2020)

The Futures Thinking Process

There are a variety of options when it comes to a process you might use to engage with futures thinking. Two we have explored at the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) are from the [University of Houston's Professional Certificate in Foresight course](#) and the [Institute for the Future's free Coursera course, "Ready, Set, Future! Introduction to Futures Thinking."](#)

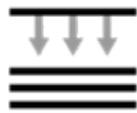
The method put forward by Andy Hines in the Certificate in Foresight course through the University of Houston has six main steps to follow when applying the foresight methodology to a project:

1. Framing - Develop a scope for the project and complete an assessment of the current environment.
2. Scanning - Searching for signals of change and specific future inputs.
3. Futuring - Identifying a baseline and alternative futures.
4. Visioning - Exploring the implications of future scenarios and committing to one.
5. Designing - Crafting options and an integrated strategic approach.
6. Adapting - Communications, ongoing monitoring, and implementation.



Framing

Scoping the project, defining the focal issue and current conditions



Scanning

Exploring signals of change or indicators of the futures



Futuring

Identifying a baseline and alternative futures



Visioning

Developing and committing to a preferred future



Designing

Developing prototypes, offerings or artifacts to achieve the vision and goals



Adapting

Enabling organizations to generate options to alternatives futures

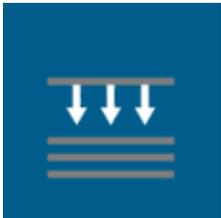
The six main steps of foresight methodology according to Andy Hines. From a blog post titled, "Evolution of Framework Foresight (part 1)." ([source](#))

Scenario: the library is running out of space, what should we do?



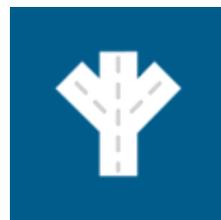
FRAMING

- Establish a scope for the project: Are we considering totally new construction, like a new branch? Are we only considering expanding the current building? Do we just need more storage space, or do we also need bigger rooms for programs? What is the scope of this project? What are our limitations in considering what we can do to solve this issue?
 - Assess the current environment: How is the library currently used? How much impact does a lack of space have on library operations? How much need is there in the community and how could the library meet that need? What are other libraries in similar communities doing?
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SCANNING

- Search for signals of change: What is changing in the community that could impact the library? Is there significant population growth in the area? What are the trends?
 - Consider future inputs: What could happen in the future that could significantly impact the library's plans? What if a new factory opens up nearby and the population grows? Are you anticipating significant financial donations to the library in the coming years?
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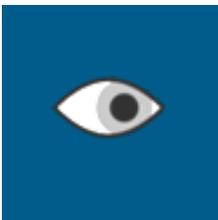
FUTURING

- Identify a baseline: Since late 2020, library use statistics have been steadily increasing each year, and we predict that growth to stay relatively the same. Our baseline assumption is that library use will continue to increase over time, and the town's population is expected to steadily increase as well. We also

FUTURING, CONTINUED

expect that the community will continue to have a positive outlook toward the library, as we have a great relationship now. In this future, the library is a valued resource that is used often by the community.

- Identify alternative futures:
 - Growth - In 10 years, a new factory is built just outside of the town, which brings in several thousand new families to your community in a short amount of time. Storytime is so full of children that the fire department is worried about the room reaching capacity.
 - Collapse - In 10 years, our economy falls into a depression and many people lose their jobs. The library is asked to cut its budget by 50% even as it sees use of its resources skyrocket. The computer lab has never been so busy.
 - Transformation - In 10 years, Idaho and Oregon merge to become a new state. The library, as a government entity, is reshuffled into a new county government that is used to doing things in a slightly different way. All of the library's policies have to be rewritten.
 - Discipline - In 10 years, new laws are created that strictly regulate the material that libraries can have in their collections, and, as a result, community use of the library is dramatically reduced. As materials become less relevant, events and discussions become more popular.



VISIONING

- Explore the implications of future scenarios: Using the data we've collected so far, there are several good options to work with: expand the existing library building, build a second branch location, buy/lease an existing physical location and transform it into a branch library, or invest in a bookmobile.
- Committing to one: After much consideration and discussion, the board decided to go with the plan to buy/lease an existing physical location and transform it into a branch library.



DESIGNING

- **Creating options:** There are several great options to consider when looking at buying/leasing an existing location and transforming it into a new branch library. Location A is on the west side of town where there is a lot of new population growth, in a strip mall next to a grocery store. Location B is on the east side of town where there is also a lot of new population growth, in a standalone building that will need some repair. Location C is on the north side of town where there is less population growth, but property is more affordable. And location D is on the south side of town close to a school.
 - **Creating an integrated strategic approach:** Given these options, what does the library value most? At this stage the library would need to pick a location and start working toward the goal of making it a functional branch library. It is essential to create a strategic plan to organize this process.
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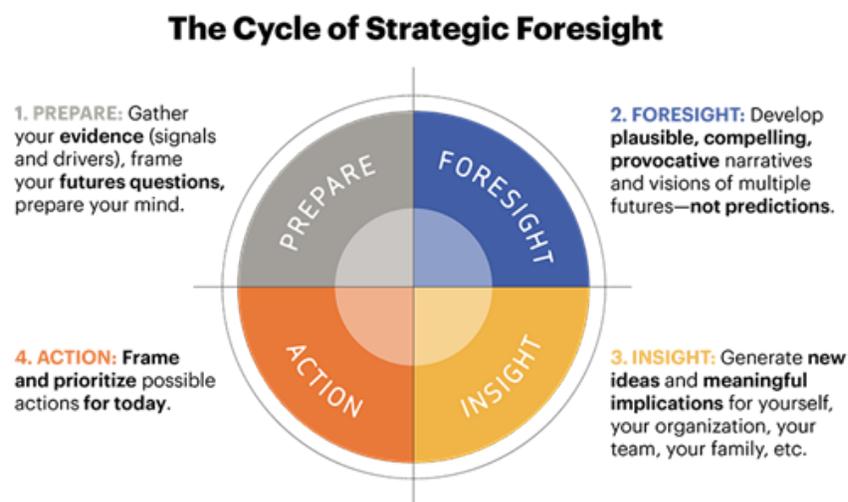
ADAPTING

- **Communications:** Once a plan has been decided upon, the library needs to start communicating its intentions to stakeholders and the community. Communicating about the project will be a continuous process.
- **Monitoring:** It is important to monitor the project to ensure that the various pieces are in place and systems are working as they should. In a project as large as this one, it is important to keep an eye on it.
- **Implementation:** Once the project is completed, the library will have a new, functional branch in a new location, designed to meet the needs of the community it serves.

It might help to think of the first three steps of the process as mapping and the last three as influencing. The mapping phase sets out a process to gather information that will help you identify what futures are likely. The influencing phase is where you choose your preferred future and create a plan of how you, or your library, will influence future events to reach that preferred future.

There are many parts of this six-step process. A helpful component is using a STEEP analysis to look at future trends. STEEP is an acronym for social, technological, economic, environmental, and political. Looking at future trends in these five areas is an important part of the futures thinking process.

Another model put forward by Jane McGonigal in the [Institute for the Future's free Coursera course, "Ready, Set, Future! Introduction to Futures Thinking"](#) is the cycle of strategic foresight.



The Cycle of Strategic Foresight according to the Institute for the Future. (source)

This model is cyclical, rather than linear, and has fewer steps. In the “prepare” phase of the cycle, you can think of evidence and signals as anything that makes you curious about what is causing a situation. In the “foresight” phase, you boldly imagine what future might come. The “insight” phase gives you the opportunity to imagine how you or your organization might be impacted in those futures. Finally, in the “action” phase, you will determine actions that can get you and your organization to the future you want.

If these processes feel overwhelming, here are a few questions from the [free e-book, “Introduction to Strategic Foresight”](#) that might get you started:

- What is driving our system?
- What are the underlying structural relationships?
- What is already in the pipeline?
- What would be the role of our organization in the future?

Futures Thinking in Practice

You might be wondering, “What does all of this look like when put to use in libraries?” To answer that question, here are two examples of how the ICfL has incorporated futures thinking into in-person events.

Futures Camp

Library staff from throughout Idaho gathered in June 2019 at a unique three-day summer camp to dream, envision, and shape the future of libraries. Within the award-winning Cruzen-Murray Library on the historic College of Idaho campus in Caldwell, Idaho, campers united to engage with emerging trends, build connections, experience a variety of hands-on activities, listen to inspiring keynote speakers, and participants developed a plan to take their learning back to their library. Details from the event, including the agenda, recordings, and activity journal can be found on the [ICfL’s Futures Camp website](#).



Participants at the 2019 Futures Camp.

Futures Thinking Room

“Welcome to the future!” is how attendees were greeted by the Special Projects Library Action Team (SPLAT) during the Idaho Library Association’s 2022 annual conference in Lewiston, Idaho. SPLAT members came together to host an interactive, imaginative experience where attendees were asked to envision what libraries might be like in 10 years.

Two different future scenarios were presented for participants to think about. On day one, after walking through a black curtain, participants were given images of a deteriorating world. They were then asked to imagine a future where society has collapsed, and libraries no longer have physical spaces. It was a little difficult to think about such a bleak future. However, the great thing about taking the time to think through this scenario is that we will be better prepared for such a future, even if only parts of it come to pass.

On day two, after walking through a colorful futuristic curtain, participants were asked to imagine a future in which a former library director has been elected President of the United States, and libraries now have unlimited federal funding. What a contrast from day one! On both days, we asked participants to focus their ideas on these topics: what would the role of the library in the community be; and what kind of job titles, patron services, technology, and library services would there be in this future? These prompts were loosely based on the STEEP categories used in futures thinking (social, technical, economic, environmental, and political).

In reviewing what participants wrote, we noticed a few trends. These included: variations on the theme of libraries serving as the resource and information hub for their communities; library staff as storytellers or advisors; and low-tech things such as bicycles, along with high-tech items like Virtual Reality (VR). We were struck by the similarities between what library staff do now and what participants envisioned them doing in the future. Some of the pieces and topics might be different, but at its core, participants all saw libraries and their staff as a key part of their communities. What job titles, services, technology, or roles do you imagine for each of the two scenarios? The results from our two-day activity are shared in an [article](#) from an issue of the [Curiosity Report](#), SPLAT’s bimonthly newsletter.

COLLAPSE SCENARIO PATRON SERVICES



GROWTH SCENARIO PATRON SERVICES



Participant responses from the futures thinking room.

Left: collapse scenario, patron services.

Right: growth scenario, patron services.

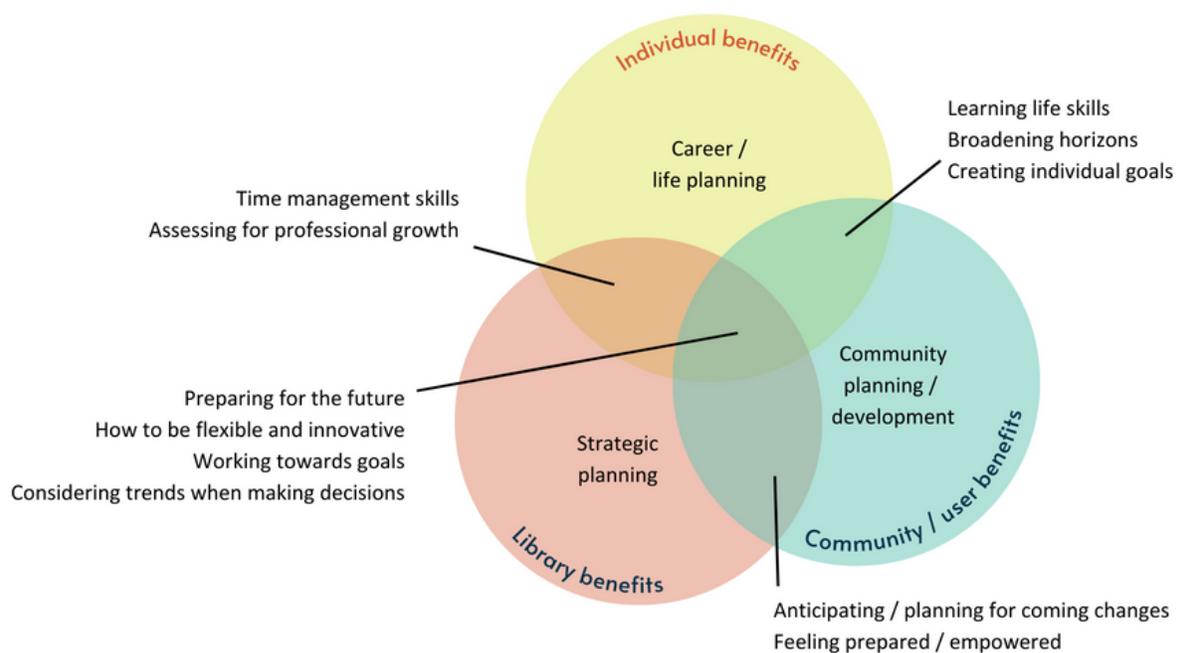
Why Is This Valuable for Librarians?

Take a moment and think of the skills and aptitudes you think successful library staff might possess. The [Institute for the Future's free Coursera course, "Ready, Set, Future! Introduction to Futures Thinking"](#) lays out seven key strengths that futures thinking helps build:

1. Creativity
2. Foresight
3. Mental Flexibility
4. Empathy
5. Practical Skepticism
6. Strategy
7. Hope

We'll assume at least one of those strengths is on your list. That means according to your own list, building futures thinking strengths is a way to build and strengthen the capabilities of library staff.

With all the speculation concerning what the future of libraries will be, thinking strategically about the future is becoming an increasingly important skill. Practicing futures thinking enables those who work in libraries to develop meaningful and achievable goals as well as the strategies to attain them. That could be in individual career or life planning, learning life skills to meet anticipated needs, and creating individual goals. For the library, that could also mean strategic planning, preparing for the future, and considering trends when making decisions. Futures thinking can help community members feel prepared and empowered to anticipate and plan for what's to come.



A venn diagram of the benefits of futures thinking for individuals, libraries, and the community.

What Can You Use It For? Who Uses This?

You can use futures thinking to consider any challenge.

This toolkit is intended for people who work in any type of library to utilize to begin thinking about and engaging with futures thinking in their work and in their lives. Our hope is that by thinking about the future in a strategic way, library workers will be better prepared to craft their preferred futures and work toward them, whether that's in a professional or personal setting.